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ABSTRACT

A group of dedicated teachers in Gilmer County High School, Glenville, West Virginia (WV), worked with school administrators to make far-reaching changes to prepare all students for further study and the workplace. With their experiences from High Schools That Work workshops and help from a WV Department of Education representative, educators began a process to write a plan that would focus on higher achievement for all students. To improve student achievement, school leaders raised graduation requirements; replaced the general track by designing a challenging curriculum; developed programs of study; allowed eighth graders to take algebra; prepared teachers to raise classroom expectations through applied learning strategies; upgraded technology; switched to block scheduling; and provided professional development. Further plans were to improve the mathematics curriculum; train teachers to get students to write across the curriculum; raise standards in all English classes; provide workshops for high school teachers and career center teachers to develop joint assignments; improve guidance to middle grade students; and follow up graduates. The state, school district, and the Southern Regional Education Board supported Gilmer County's efforts. (YLB)

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Case Study

Gilmer County High School

Glenville, W.Va.

This high school is fulfilling a commitment made seven years ago: to prepare all students for further study and the workplace. The school's success began with a group of dedicated teachers who worked with school administrators to make far-reaching changes. As a result, this school has become a model for others in overcoming obstacles and producing successful students.

The Setting

Gilmer County High School is located in Glenville, W.Va., in one of the more rural counties in the state. The county covers 340 square miles of central Appalachian foothills and has a population of about 7,000. When the small agricultural and fossil-fuel economies disappeared, Gilmer became the third poorest county in West Virginia.

The people of Gilmer County work in oil and gas, timber, small manufacturing, small business, education and local government. The community values education and has supported extra taxes for education in four recent elections.

Gilmer County High School enrolls 578 students in grades seven through 12. Ninety-nine percent of the students are non-minority. Sixty-six percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Calhoun-Gilmer Career Center — located 15 miles from the high school — serves vocational/technical students through a variety of programs.

Why Gilmer County Wanted to Improve Student Achievement

In the 1990s, the faculty at Gilmer County High School began to recognize that not all students were being prepared adequately for the future. In fact, only 14 percent of students were completing the college-preparatory curriculum.

At the same time, the staff at Calhoun-Gilmer Career Center became concerned about low performance. Students were deficient in reading, writing, mathematics and science. Clearly, the high school and the career center needed to work jointly to help students succeed. They needed to:

- Convince the board of education, teachers, parents and the community that both schools should raise student achievement;
- Get teachers at the high school and the career center to work together to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning;

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- Raise academic requirements for graduation;
- Convince the community that new curricula were needed at both schools;
- Provide staff development for teachers;
- Obtain funds to implement the desired changes; and
- Provide time for the staffs of the two schools to plan, design and incorporate the needed changes.

What Gilmer County Has Done to Improve Student Achievement

While several Gilmer County educators had attended *High Schools That Work* workshops and were "itching" to get started on school improvement, they realized the importance of a written plan that would focus on higher achievement for all students. A representative of the West Virginia Department of Education agreed to conduct a two-day site development conference for teams from Gilmer County High School and Calhoun-Gilmer Career Center. During this event, local administrators and teachers agreed on a mission statement that would raise expectations for students and the faculty.

They continued the planning process by collecting information on best practices, attending *HSTW* conferences and workshops, hosting visits by educators from successful *HSTW* sites, and participating in *HSTW* technical assistance visits to nearby sites. In the spring of 1994, the faculty senate voted unanimously that Gilmer County High School would become a *HSTW* site. They agreed to allot time at monthly senate meetings to discuss the improvement efforts. Every professional staff member joined a *HSTW* committee and received training in team-building.

The 1994 *HSTW* Assessment provided vital baseline information on student achievement. "The results made us face reality," one school leader said. "As we looked at our deficiencies, we were able to focus more clearly on our improvement plan." The plan called for:

- Raising graduation requirements;
- Replacing the general track;
- Developing programs of study;
- Allowing eighth-graders to take algebra;
- Preparing teachers to raise classroom expectations through applied learning strategies;
- Upgrading technology;
- Switching from a traditional seven-period day to a 4-by-4 block schedule that enables students to complete four full-year courses per semester; and
- Providing professional development to help teachers change what and how they teach.

Raised Graduation Requirements

To get students to complete a challenging academic core and a concentration, school leaders eliminated the general track and raised graduation requirements. Their actions included:

- Eliminating "general" and "basic" English courses;
- Dropping low-level mathematics courses;

Changes in Graduation Requirements at Gilmer County High School

Graduation Requirements Prior to the Class of 2000	***Graduation Requirements for the Class of 2003***
4 credits in English/language arts	4 credits in English/language arts
2 credits in mathematics	3 credits in mathematics (One must be equivalent to Algebra I and one must be in a higher-level mathematics course.)
2 credits in science	3 credits in science (at least two lab-based courses)
3 credits in social studies	3 credits in social studies
1 credit in applied arts (fine or performing) or a foreign language	1 credit in fine arts
1 credit in health	1 credit in health
1 credit in physical education	1 credit in physical education
7 credits in elective courses	1 credit in computer applications
	1 credit in career orientation
	4 credits in a planned career concentration
	6 elective credits
21 total credits	***28 total credits***

- Developing career clusters and majors;
- Challenging all students to complete an upgraded academic core; and
- Placing gold seals on the diplomas of students who completed career concentrations.

Gilmer County raised high school graduation requirements from 21 credits in 1995-96 to 24 credits for the Class of 2000. In another bold move in 1998-99, the county increased graduation requirements to 28 credits for the Class of 2003.

Replaced the General Track by Designing a Challenging Curriculum

Gilmer County's leaders knew that it was not enough to raise graduation requirements and eliminate low-level classes. They had to offer solid academic courses that would prepare all students — not just 14 percent — for postsecondary education and promising careers. At the same time, they knew it would be hard to get students to take courses, such as college-preparatory English, high-level mathematics and lab-based science, that their parents had never been expected to take. School leaders motivated students by showing how academic courses would help them prepare for and advance in their chosen career fields.

A group of teachers, administrators, community representatives, business leaders and content-area specialists from nearby Glenville State College developed programs of study in six broad career clusters: 1) engineering/technical, 2) health, 3) science and natural resources, 4) human services, 5) fine arts/humanities and 6) business/marketing. In informing students and parents about the programs of study and the new graduation requirements, school leaders sent information home to parents, conducted public meetings, oriented teachers countywide to the changes, and placed articles in the local newspaper.

Gilmer County's Guidance and Advisement System

Grade 7: Students and parents participate in an orientation session and a school tour.
Students begin to develop career portfolios.

Grade 8: Students and parents attend a dinner to learn about the five-year planning process.
Students take a half-day tour of the career center.
Students, parents and school representatives attend one-on-one conferences to develop five-year plans.
Students attend two half-hour sessions with their advisers each month.
Students continue to develop portfolios.

Grade 9: Students and parents review the five-year plans.
Students attend two half-hour sessions with their advisers each month.
Students expand their career portfolios.

Grade 10: Students participate in a job-shadowing day.
Students attend two half-hour sessions with their advisers each month.
Students expand their career portfolios.
Students and parents review the five-year plans.

Grade 11: Students attend two half-hour sessions with their advisers each month.
Students expand their career portfolios.
Students and parents review the five-year plans.

Grade 12: Students attend two half-hour sessions with their advisers each month.
Students complete their career portfolios.

Improved Guidance and Advisement

The school stepped up its efforts to get students and their parents to meet with counselors and other school representatives to plan challenging programs of study and to review them annually. Eighth-graders had been developing high school programs of study, but no one had been reviewing the plans with the students until grade 10. As a result, many students strayed from their original plans. Acting on a recommendation from a *HSTW* technical assistance team, school leaders expanded the guidance and advisement system to include teacher-advisers who meet with small groups of students for at least an hour per month. These meetings provide in-depth information on jobs and educational opportunities in broad career fields. Advisers teach organizational skills, discuss career and educational planning, and help students develop career portfolios. Eighth-graders and their parents meet with school representatives to develop five-year plans and to discuss students' schedules for the coming year. All parents have attended these sessions since 1998.

School leaders found that many eighth-graders are naive about the knowledge and skills needed to enter certain career fields. A counselor offers a course for eighth-graders in the first semester to help students pinpoint their career interests and select courses to support their choices. Students learn about programs of study and graduation requirements. This information is also presented at a dinner for eighth-graders and their parents.

Eighth-grade planning is only the beginning of the school's guidance and advisement system. Students and their parents review the plans annually with an adviser to make sure students are taking the right courses and making good grades. At the end of each session, parents sign their children's schedules for the coming year to indicate that they have reviewed them and agree with them.

"Parents are pleased that the school takes such an interest in their children," Principal John Bennett said. "Parents and community leaders praise the program, which has become a model for other schools in West Virginia."

Provided Extra Help

When schools raise expectations and standards, they often provide an extra-help system to help students succeed. Gilmer County High School's system is based on identifying students' needs and providing tutors and remedial studies during the school day and four nights per week. The school district requires students in grades nine through 11 to receive extra help if they score below the 50th percentile in reading, language arts and/or mathematics on the Stanford Achievement Test.

During the 1999-2000 school year, Gilmer County High School students received more than 1,000 hours of tutoring. School leaders credit the extra-help system with helping raise the school's statewide ranking on the SAT 9.

The school's extra-help program is paying dividends. Between 1998 and 2000, the percentage of students who scored below the basic level in reading on the *HSTW* Assessment decreased from 41 percent to 18 percent. More students are getting extra help in English — 48 percent of students in 2000, compared with only 9 percent in 1998.

Involved the Community in Providing Work-based Learning Opportunities

Seniors at Gilmer County High School participate in a 90-minute work-based learning class each day for a semester. They see careers "up close" and learn from their work-site mentors. "Students, teachers, business partners and community leaders support the program," Principal Bennett said. Sixty-seven of 84 seniors (80 percent) spent more than 7,000 hours in 23 businesses in 1999-2000. Fifty-nine of 74 students (80 percent) who were taking the career orientation course participated in a job-shadowing experience.

Provided Professional Development

Teachers must acquire new skills to make school improvement work. Gilmer County teachers attend *HSTW* and state conferences and workshops, participate in site-based professional development and visit other *HSTW* sites.

When the school aligned its curriculum to the state's mandated instructional goals and objectives, school leaders organized a workshop to train teachers to develop individualized instructional plans for low-performing students in English and mathematics.

In the year that the school joined *HSTW*, all staff members from the Calhoun-Gilmer Career Center and one-third of the high school faculty participated in a retreat focusing on the common goal of raising student achievement. As a follow-up activity, district leaders organized joint professional development workshops on both campuses.

Improved School Facilities

The district received a $5 million grant from West Virginia's school building authority and a $66,000 technology grant from School-to-Work to improve facilities and technology. The grants enabled the high school to upgrade its computer labs, add a new 16-station lab, purchase state-of-the-art broadcasting equipment, place one teacher computer and four student computers in most classrooms and provide computers for seventh- and eighth-graders to strengthen their language arts and mathematics skills. All teachers require students to use computers in preparing papers and presentations and conducting research on the Internet. Students take a nine-week keyboarding course in both the seventh and the eighth grades. Ninth-graders take a computer applications course in which they learn Microsoft Office software.

Results of Gilmer County's School Improvement Efforts

The hard work by school leaders and teachers is paying off.

Overall Academic Achievement Has Improved

Student achievement on the ACT, the SAT 9 and the *HSTW* Assessment has improved. Even though the percentage of students taking the ACT remained about the same, the average score rose

from 19.8 in 1996-97 to 20.5 in 1998-99. Between 1996 and 2000, the average ACT verbal score increased by one point and the average ACT mathematics score increased by 1.2 points. (See Figure 1.) The average score on the SAT 9 improved between 1997 and 2000 at every grade level except one.

Figure 1
Average ACT Scores at Gilmer County High School

	Verbal	Mathematics
1996	18.3	18.5
1999	19.8	19.4
2000	19.3	19.7

At least 20 percent more students scored at or above the *HSTW* goals in reading, mathematics and science in 2000 than in 1998. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2
Percentages of Gilmer County High School Students Who Met the *HSTW* Performance Goals

	1998	2000
Met the reading goal of 279	41%	60%
Met the mathematics goal of 295	54%	72%
Met the science goal of 292	40%	64%

Changes in Course-Taking Patterns Have Contributed to Higher Achievement

Gilmer County has been successful in closing down low-level courses. Most students take college-preparatory-level English in grades 9 through 12. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3
Percentages and Average Scores of Students Taking Academic English in Grades 9 and 12 at Gilmer County High School

	1998		2000	
	Percent	Average Reading Score	Percent	Average Reading Score
Academic English 9	30%	277	94%	286
Academic English 12	46%	267	97%	286

Note: Scores range from 0 to 500.

A similar pattern has emerged in mathematics. The increase in mathematics scores at Gilmer County High School between 1998 and 2000 probably is due to a larger percentage of students taking college-preparatory-level Algebra I, Algebra II and geometry. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4
Percentages and Average Scores of Students Taking Selected Mathematics Courses at Gilmer County High School

	1998		2000	
	Percent	Average Math Score	Percent	Average Math Score
College-prep Algebra I	30%	302	84%	314
Algebra II	67%	303	80%	315
Geometry	60%	301	92%	311
Algebra in the middle grades	32%	302	53%	318
Mathematics in senior year	24%	294	40%	314

Note: Scores range from 0 to 500.

Although Gilmer County High School students may be weak in science, their scores began to improve when the school started removing low-level science courses. More GCHS students in 2000 than in 1998 completed college-preparatory biology, chemistry and integrated science courses. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5
Percentages and Average Scores of Students Taking Selected Science Courses at Gilmer County High School

	1998		2000	
	Percent	Average Science Score	Percent	Average Science Score
College-prep biology	29%	267	53%	301
Chemistry	33%	283	44%	310
Integrated science	6%	124	93%	290

Note: Scores range from 0 to 500.

Dropout Rates Have Improved

While achievement at Gilmer County High School was improving between 1998 and 2000, the dropout rate declined from 3.4 percent to 2.9 percent.

Further Plans for Improvement at Gilmer County High School

School and district leaders are planning additional actions to improve student achievement. They plan to:

- Improve the mathematics curriculum in grades 7 through 12;
- Train teachers to get students to write across the curriculum;
- Raise standards in all English classes;
- Provide at least two workshops for high school teachers and career center teachers to develop joint assignments;
- Improve guidance and advisement to get middle-grades students and their parents to understand the importance of preparing for high school; and
- Contact graduates three and five years after graduation (as well as the current one-year follow-up) to gather more data on what they gained from their high school experiences.

State Policies and Practices to Support Gilmer County's Efforts

Gilmer County High School has received support from the State of West Virginia in making changes to improve student achievement.

- The state pays for students to participate in the *HSTW* Assessment.
- The state legislature and the state board of education increased graduation requirements. All students must complete:
  - four courses in a concentration in a career cluster developed by the school;
  - three instead of two courses in mathematics, including Algebra I and a higher-level course;
  - three instead of two courses in science, including two lab-based courses.
- The state requires schools to involve all eighth-graders and their parents in working with a school adviser to develop a five-year program of study. Each eighth-grader and his or her parents prepare a plan for grades 9 and 10. They review the plan in grade 10 and select a concentration for the last two years of high school. The plan may be amended at any time.
- The state requires high schools to give each student an opportunity to participate in a work-based learning experience.
- The state department of education provides technical assistance to help school leaders plan and implement an improvement initiative.
- The school received a $150,000 School-to-Work implementation grant.

Further State Support Needed

Gilmer County's leaders hope the state will continue to enact legislation and make policies that will boost student achievement. They want the state to:

- Maintain the focus on school improvement;
- Continue to fund the *HSTW* Assessment annually;
- Expand technical assistance for school improvement; and
- Help upgrade science labs.

School District Support for Gilmer County's Efforts

School and district leaders have supported the school improvement effort by:

- Raising graduation requirements;
- Making it possible for the high school and the career center to work together;
- Providing transportation for students who stay after school to receive extra help;
- Employing additional staff to assist with school improvement;
- Giving school leaders and teachers the flexibility to try new instructional practices; and
- Securing funding for school improvement. The district has received School-to-Work grants, an Urban-Rural Opportunities grant and a West Virginia School Building Authority grant.

How SREB Assisted Gilmer County High School

School and district leaders credit *HSTW* with helping Gilmer County High School improve student achievement. *HSTW* makes it possible for the school to:

- Use the *HSTW* goals and key practices as a framework for comprehensive school improvement.
- Participate in the *HSTW* Assessment to identify challenges in improving curriculum and instruction.
- Receive technical assistance confirming that the school is on the right track, helping leaders and teachers see the remaining challenges, and providing a set of "doable" actions to address the challenges.
- Receive professional development on ways to get students to meet higher graduation requirements.
- Participate in a large network of schools with the same goal. One school leader said, "It is encouraging to know that other schools have survived dramatic changes and raised student achievement."

- Receive *HSTW* books, newsletters, research reports, site guides and descriptions of outstanding practices.

Summary

Principal John Bennett summarizes Gilmer County's progress in school improvement:

"*High Schools That Work* has given us a tremendous sense of direction. From the beginning, we knew we could do better for our students. Although many of our leaders thought *High Schools That Work* was strictly a vocational initiative and would somehow hurt our academic students, we have found just the opposite. Our high standards are ensuring that all students are prepared for college. In the past, many seniors who decided at the last minute that they wanted to enter college were 'locked out' because they had not taken the right courses. We made many of the changes that *HSTW* advocated — and found that they improved the achievement of all students."

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